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AUTHOR Levy, Stephen L.
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ABSTRACT

Different aspects of multi-level foreign language classes, where two or more levels of foreign language are taught within a single class period, are discussed. The proliferation of multi-level classes has been brought about by a variety of factors that present a difficult instructional assignment to the foreign language staff. The roles of the teacher and the students are examined and it is emphasized that this type of class can and should be a positive experience for both. Teaching strategies for the multi-level class include: (1) the split period, (2) the modified split period, (3) independent study, (4) individualized instruction, (5) rotating levels, and (6) special interest (mini) courses. The use of student aids who work for credit and of paraprofessionals is also mentioned. Hints on the types of instructional materials and equipment best suited or easily adapted to multi-level classes are given and suggestions are made for improving the training of both pre- and in-service teachers. (EKN)

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TEACHING MULTI-LEVEL FOREIGN LANGUAGE CLASSES

Stephen L. Levy
36 Remsen Street
Brooklyn, New York 11201
Roslyn (NY) Public Schools
212-624-5109 (Home)
516-621-4900, ext. 293 (School)

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INTRODUCTION

The multi-level class is one in which two or more levels of foreign language is taught within a single class period. This type of class organization has long existed in foreign language programs across the nation. Yet in our current educational milieu it has proliferated as budgets and enrollments have declined.

CAUSES OF THE MULTI-LEVEL CLASS

The proliferation of the multi-level class has been brought about by a variety of factors which include:

- (1) attrition in enrollment which is the result of lessened interest in certain languages or extended language sequences;
- (2) small junior and senior high schools with limited enrollments;
- (3) school systems which have a minimum class size requirement in order for a course to be offered;
- (4) the offering of a particular language with too few students enrolled who will ultimately demonstrate a commitment to continue into the next level of instruction;
- (5) an extensive sequence of advanced courses in which few students can or do enroll;
- (6) programming or scheduling problems which cause

students to pick between two singleton classes which are scheduled for the same time period; usually the language class is the 'victim' in this situation;

- (7) provision for special groups, i.e. 'repeaters,' which are small in number and which ultimately lead the students to drop or change courses;
- (8) the need of the school administration to attempt to balance an 'overload' in a singleton class in the absence of additional staff by combining the 'overload' with another foreign language class;
- (9) the fiscal situation of the school which requires using the teacher's services in another subject area.

Whatever the reason may be in a given school, the foreign language staff has been faced with, and continues to be faced with a difficult and challenging instructional assignment. Nevertheless, foreign language educators must be cognizant that those students who are enrolled in these courses have demonstrated their commitment to continue the study of the foreign language. The school district and the professional staff have a moral commitment to continue to offer a sequence once students have opted for and begun that sequence.

A survey conducted by the Prince George's County Public Schools in the fall of 1978 revealed information concerning the multi-level or combined foreign language class in Prince George's County and in neighboring school systems in the metropolitan Washington area, Virginia, Maryland, and the District of Columbia.

The results of this survey indicated that the combined class represents a viable instructional arrangement in most districts. Following this survey, information was gathered about the teaching strategies used in these classes. The message it gave to teachers being trained for teaching multi-level classes was one of optimism. While many of the familiar methods of instruction and classroom management will no longer be appropriate, inherent in the teaching of combined classes are several ways to improve instruction. These include the opportunity to try new teaching techniques and materials; to introduce the principles of group dynamics which are usually less effective with large, homogeneous classes; to capitalize on the normal attention span of the adolescent; to integrate and coordinate various media into instruction; to make students more active in their own education. The combined class can come to mean challenge, excitement, and fun.⁽¹⁾

Frequently the offering of a multi-level class in foreign languages represents a victory for the foreign language department over the school administration. In these times of limited and curtailed funding for education, principals, as the chief administrators of their schools, establish a number which becomes the thread of life between offering and cancelling a course. It is a considerable feat to convince administrators that the establishment of a multi-level class is a viable means of continuing to offer a particular course and/or sequence within the administrative constraints. The willingness of the foreign

language staff to work with multi-level classes demonstrates their flexibility, dedication, and commitment to the educational pursuits of their students. Experience teaching a multi-level class shows that it can be a gratifying, satisfying, rewarding, challenging, and delightful experience for the teacher as well as for the students.

ORGANIZING THE MULTI LEVEL-CLASS

Guiding Principles

There are few sources, if any, to which foreign language teachers can look for advice on how to go about organizing and teaching the multi-level class. Textbooks on foreign language methodology have not dealt with this topic per se. There also exists a dearth of articles by practitioners in professional journals on this topic. The organization of this class usually grows out of the teacher's individual perception of the situation and the combination of courses or grade levels that constitute the class. Then the teacher's ingenuity, creativity, adaptability, and stamina will come into play. What must emerge within this class is a spirit of camaraderie and a sense of belonging among the students. They must be made to feel that they are part of one large group. The major guiding principle in organizing and teaching a multi-level class is that it be a positive experience for the students as well as for the teacher.

The Teacher

Flexibility and the willingness to try new techniques and

approaches are important characteristics that the teacher of the multi-level class should possess. The multi-level class cannot function as a teacher-centered, totally teacher-directed classroom. Careful thought leading to intelligent decisions about which activities can be delegated to the students for completion must be made by the teacher. Students in a multi-level class must, by necessity, be taught greater independence in their pursuit of learning and they must also be taught to assume responsibility for the learning process. This is a basic and primary tenet of effective qualitative learning which should be put into greater practice not only in the multi-level class but in all classes. As the school year progresses, the students should become increasingly more self-sufficient through the guidance provided by the teacher. The effective use of this practice will aid the teacher to maximize the use of class time and increase the number of direct contact hours working with the students. The resultant experience will be cost effective and cost efficient for the teacher and the students.

As in any educational setting, the teacher is the key. The teacher's attitude toward teaching a multi-level class is of crucial importance because any sense of insecurity, frustration, or perplexity on the part of the teacher will immediately be felt by the students and transferred to them. The teacher must be able to formulate realistic instructional objectives and to share them with the students. The next step is to put into practice activities that will lead to the fulfillment of these

instructional objectives in a meaningful manner. Prime requisites in achieving this are careful and thoughtful preparation and optimum effective use of class time. It is also essential that the teacher be able to work with the class divided into groups or other class organization that deviates from the full class instructional practice.

The Students

The greatest problems lie in how the class is run and in dealing with the different students in the class. On a positive note, it should be noted that despite the fact that the class for which these students have opted has been combined with another course, the students have demonstrated their commitment to remain with it and continue their study of the foreign language. Yet we know that each of our students learns in his/her unique way and hence, some may be more suited to group or individualized work while others will perform better in a larger group organization. Therein is the major problem with which this monograph will deal: teaching the multi-level foreign language class.

Supportive Assistance

Support has two faces in the discussion of the multi-level class: moral support and financial support. Moral support needs to be gained through good public relations that involves the parents, the guidance counselors, and the school administration. Parents have to be informed of the positive learning gains that are being accomplished in the combined class through exciting and effective teaching strategies. The guidance counselors, our

crucial link with the educational consumer--the student--, must be made aware of this viable educational program and transmit this information to the students. The administration too must become aware, through direct observation and periodic on-going meetings with the staff members teaching these classes and their department chairpersons, of the success of these classes. They must also become aware of the special needs of these teachers concerning planning materials, projects, packets, etc., for these classes prior to their inception. Hence, additional support for in-service training of the teachers and for summer projects must be made evident to the administrators.

The second face of support--financial support--comes in the form of providing the teachers with released time for preparation of materials for these classes, summer workshops also for the preparation of the curriculum and materials, and where possible, paraprofessional assistance for the teacher in the classroom itself. Monies should also be made available to insure that the teacher of the multi-level class has the equipment and accompanying software that will enable him/her to use different instructional strategies.

TEACHING STRATEGIES FOR THE MULTI-LEVEL CLASS

Programming and scheduling are usually the prime determinants in deciding which classes will be combined. There is no perfect answer as to which levels are better suited to combination. Naturally, each would be better if scheduled separately. Yet, it may be best to combine those levels that are closest, e.g. Levels I and II, Levels II and III, etc.,

rather than, if at all possible, to have a disparate mixture such as Level I and Level IV.

How does the teacher approach the multi-level class? The initial thought may be to homogenize the students and to treat them as a single class. This can be a dangerous move, even in a class of Level IV and V students where the differences in ability may be minimal.

The most logical approach seems to be to maintain the two classes as separate entities by and large, and for the teacher to split his/her time between the two groups. The principal caveat here is to keep the students from feeling that they are half-time students receiving half-time instruction. Such a syndrome can have the effect of creating a decreased level of expectation and performance by the students which can and may very well lead to their dropping the course, thereby adding to and perpetuating the vicious cycle of combined classes due to decreased student enrollment.

The Split Period Approach

The teacher may choose to implement a split-period approach. In so doing, the teacher divides the class into two groups and shares the class time between the two groups. If the teacher chooses to adopt this approach, the following suggestions should be considered:

- (1) Clear objectives and learning outcomes should be presented to each group so that they know what is required of them each day;

- (2) Each group within the class must always know what they should be doing, where they should be in the room, and at what time it will be their turn to work with the teacher;
- (3) The work planned for each group should include work that is meaningful to the students vis-a-vis the specific learning objective on which they are working. It should not be 'busywork' nor should the students come to perceive it as such.

The split-class approach may be varied to provide for other types of structuring possibilities. These may include having each group work separately during portions of all or some class periods; permitting the higher level to make occasional presentations to the lower level or to use the higher level students as 'buddies' or tutors for the lower level students. The groups can also be combined into a single group and the same presentation can be made to both groups but requiring different levels of response. Both groups can be encouraged to work together in a new activity from time to time. (2)

Implicit in this approach is the need for prior planning of the goals and objectives for each group. Instructions must be clear and unambiguous so that students can make maximum use of the class time and the teacher's energy and expertise will not be sacrificed or wasted in order to call the students to task for attempting to take advantage of the class organization by socializing with each other or to simply not perform to their optimum.

The Modified Split Period Approach

Brannon and Cox describe a modification of the split-period approach.⁽³⁾ The teacher may alternate the time spent with the two groups depending on the topic being taught. It is possible to work two days with one group and three days with the other group, reversing the procedure each week. Long-range projects can be assigned for completion while the teacher works with the other group. The two groups should be brought together at regular intervals to share the results of these projects. This is important because it encourages interaction between the two groups which is of mutual benefit and accentuates the sense of one unified combined group made up of the two classes.

Independent Study

When only a few students have registered for a course, the teacher may wish to offer the course on an independent study basis. Clarification of the goals and objectives of the course, the amount and type of work the students will need to do to achieve these objectives, and the mode of evaluation that will be employed to determine if the students have attained the objectives need to be understood by the students from the outset. These students may work at home, in the school library, in the language laboratory, or in the foreign language study center. Periodic meetings should be planned with the students to provide guidance, correction, explanation and a sense of interim evaluation. It is also important that within our goal of the development of communicative competence, that activities be planned and required that will aid the student to continue to develop and improve his/her oral ability in the target language.

Individualized Instruction

In a combined class of more than two levels or more than one language, the teacher may decide that the best option is to individualize the learning program for the students. This presupposes that the teacher will prepare learning activity packets for the different courses which will enable the students to move through the curriculum on their own. It also presupposes that the students will be aware of the objectives of their course, how they will go about achieving them, and the means by which their achievement of these objectives will be measured. The students must assume responsibility for completing the work set out for them. The teacher will also need to meet with small groups during the class period to monitor the students' progress, provide explanations, make presentations of specific topics, and stimulate interaction between them in the foreign language.

In the combined class in which the teacher opts for an individualized approach, he/she is not necessarily advocating a self-pacing or individual progress philosophy as did individualized instruction as we knew it in the 1970's. Rather, this is a viable approach to meeting the needs of different students who are enrolled in different courses which convene at the same time with the same teacher in the same classroom.

Rotating Levels Approach

In a 'rotating levels approach,' the teacher deals with the students as a single class and alternates the curricular content each year. The students receive credit for the course

in which they are enrolled although they may be completing the work that has traditionally been part of another course or level. This has been practiced in Latin classes where students in Latin III and IV read Cicero and receive credit for their respective courses. The following year they read Vergil and are awarded credit in a like manner. Teachers of Levels IV and V modern language classes have also practiced this approach when both courses are combined into one class. They alternate the reading they do as well as other units in the curriculum.

Special-Interest (Mini) Courses

Another means of dealing successfully with advanced level courses that obviates the 'split-class' approach is to create special-interest or mini-courses which are offered to all of the advanced level students at the same time. Although the content is the same for all of the students, the teacher should make adjustments in the objectives and student participation based on each student's level. This approach also breathes fresh air into the curriculum because it enables the teacher to plan curriculum around a particular theme, e.g. Advanced Composition, French Art, The Role of the Indian in Latin America, Italian Opera, which may be the outgrowth of pupil interest and/or need. It also creates a series of electives which the students take when they reach the advanced levels. This may make the advanced level courses more attractive to the students and increase the number of students who choose to continue with the advanced level courses in the foreign language.

Student-Aide Programs

Peer teaching is an excellent means of meeting the individual needs of students in a multi-level class. In addition to using the higher-level students in the class as 'buddies' or tutors for the lower-level students, advanced level students can be assigned to work with specific students throughout a semester and receive credit for their work.

A student-aide program involving third- and fourth-year students of Spanish at Conway Senior High School in Horry County, South Carolina is described by Brannon and Cox.⁽⁴⁾ Each student aide is assigned certain first and second year students at the beginning of the school year. The aide is to work with these students daily in an individualized program. The aide receives a handbook which lists his/her privileges and responsibilities, the subject content with which he/she must be familiar, and specific teaching strategies to be used in working with the lower-level students. The aide is also responsible for preparing other materials to be used with his students, e.g. taping audio programs, creating learning centers. The aide receives a grade for the course, one-half unit of credit per semester. The aide is evaluated by the teacher, by the students with whom the aide has worked, and by the aide himself. A certificate of merit is also awarded to those aides who have participated in the program for two semesters.

Differentiated Staffing

A program of differentiated staffing is an invaluable aid in the multi-level class. Paraprofessionals, student teachers,

and interns who work with small groups of students in the same or different rooms serve to strengthen and raise the amount and level of instruction and learning that takes place in the multi-level class while easing the physical burden imposed on the teacher of the class. The teacher remains the professional who is responsible and accountable for the planning, implementation, supervision and evaluation that takes place in the class. Community members who may be native speakers of the language, retired foreign language teachers, or members of the community members who have proficiency in the language can be encouraged to volunteer their assistance several days a week in the multi-level class. This cadre of volunteers can be secured through a school and community-wide inventory that ascertains the special abilities or talents of students, teachers, parents and other members of the community.

An open line of communication should be established between the school in which the multi-level class exists and the teacher training department of the local college or university. This would encourage the assignment of student teachers to this school from which both educational institutions would derive mutual benefit. The school would have additional support for the students in the multi-level class. The college or university would be offering their student teachers the most up-to-date practical pre-teaching experience which will aid them immeasurably once they become full time teachers.

MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT

Materials of all types are a vital and integral part of the multi-level class. Tapes, cassettes, and visuals are used extensively because the teacher cannot work or direct the entire class at the same time. The auditory component is very important through the use of tapes, cassettes and records because it enables the teacher to stress the listening skill and to provide them with listening practice which represents different speakers of the language.

Publishers are also producing materials that can be easily adapted for the multi-level class. Books of exercises on vocabulary, structures and culture which are printed on ditto masters are becoming readily available. These 'supplementary' materials offer the teacher some respite in the preparation of additional worksheets on the topics being studied.

Supplementary textbooks such as review grammars and graded readers that have laid fallow on bookroom shelves can be put to excellent use in the multi-level class. They provide the opportunity to go beyond the basic curriculum and are meaningful adjuncts because the teacher can relate them and recommend them based upon the individual needs and interests of the students. Special assignments can be made from these materials and can become group projects which is in consonance with the organization of the class.

Several large group materials that can be used successfully to bring the smaller groups together are songs, puzzles, games,

riddles, skits, dramatization, career education activities, guest speakers and competitions. These may be developed at the beginning or end of the period or represent the culminating activity based on the work of one or more groups.

Picture files, filmstrips, slides, and films also enhance the group or full-class activities of the multi-level class. The same can be said about periodicals, magazines, and newspapers which may be obtained through the school library. These materials can provide linguistic and cultural enrichment in an enjoyable manner.

The overhead and opaque projectors will also be useful tools in the multi-level class when they are used by the students themselves as well as by the teacher. Transparencies can become the focal point for a group as the teacher leaves them to work with another group. The tape recorder and cassette player can be adapted to become a 'listening station' or miniature portable language laboratory. Students will also have greater opportunity to record their voices on tape as they work in a small group structure. As teachers of the multi-level class integrate the hardware and software available in their lessons each day, they will find that the students are more actively involved in the learning process with a variety of materials that are stimulating and multi-functional in the development of the language skills.

The ubiquitous microcomputer will also be an important teaching/learning medium in the multi-level class. It will enable the students to master a particular topic or concept, practice it in an enjoyable manner with immediate feedback, and reinforce those topics and concepts which were not previously

mastered. As the sound component on the microcomputers becomes more refined, it will also aid the teacher of the multi-level class to develop the students' listening and speaking skills using this modern equipment. Its role and value in the multi-level class cannot be minimized because it will aid these students irregardless of the type of class structure the teacher has chosen for the class.

TEACHER TRAINING

The multi-level class is a segment of the foreign language teacher's life that is rarely shown to the prospective teacher who is readying him/herself to join the profession. Rarely is it ever mentioned in a methodology course nor are pragmatic solutions explored with these teacher candidates before they are faced with these problems on a daily basis as part of their school workload.

Teacher training should be an all encompassing experience for the aspiring foreign language teacher. Student teachers should be exposed to--if only through observation-- and participate in--if at all possible all types of teaching assignments. This exposure should include regular, honors, and slow classes; combined classes; repeater groups; special courses; etc. This experience would serve to familiarize prospective teachers with the broad audience we have in our classes today, the variety of courses we offer, and the problems that may be unique to pur subject area. This exposure should be built on prior discussion of the teaching strategies that can be employed in or adapted to different classes'

needs, including the multi-level or combined class. The first step is to prepare our future generations of foreign language teachers for the on-going challenges that will confront them in their classes as we approach the dawn of the twenty-first century.

Strasheim advocates that teacher trainers prepare their pre-service candidates for some of the realities of workloads in the schools today by:

- (1) presenting a variety of foreign-language teachers' daily schedules;
- (2) Inviting teachers with responsibilities in two or more disciplines and with multi-level classes to share their insights as guest lecturers or panelists;
- (3) Structuring the students' field experiences to include varied teacher workloads;
- (4) Making certain that teacher candidates are taught to balance teacher-led activities with those that are student directed;
- (5) Helping students overtly to develop strategies for coping with multiple daily preparations and classroom management. (5)

The area of in-service training is one that also requires attention. Practicing teachers may be too shy or ashamed to ask for help. Thus the impetus for in-service training of teachers to meet and cope with current curricular and pedagogical problems must come from department supervisors, school administrators, and state foreign language supervisors. Professional associations at the regional, state and national levels also have a role and

responsibility in the in-service training of teachers through their annual meetings and workshop/seminar programs. The publications of the professional associations can also provide responses to current trends in the profession through timely articles that offer concrete suggestions and ideas which teachers can implement immediately in their classrooms. The professional publications would thereby encourage a sharing of information, techniques, strategies, and materials among teachers facing similar problems.

Strasheim offers a plan of action for teachers of multi-level classes which would prod those who can help them. She encourages the teachers of multi-level classes to write a series of letters:

- (1) To his or her State Department of Public Instruction;
- (2) To his or her former teacher trainers;
- (3) To the president of every state and national organization to which s/he belongs; and
- (4) To the editor of every professional journal to which s/he subscribes.

These letters should contain a request for the same things:

- (1) Any help the correspondent can send by return mail;
- (2) That workshops, conference sessions, and publications address this problem with the goal of providing concrete and realistic help to the classroom teacher; and/or
- (3) That consultant services be made available. (6)

CONCLUSION

The multi-level class has been and will continue to be a natural and expanding part of the foreign language structure in our schools until such time as school budgets will permit the existence of small size classes and foreign language study becomes a priority in American education. The latter would insure foreign languages a high place on the list of priorities of school administrators and local school boards. Innovative, dynamic, and effective teaching is taking place in these classes daily by dint of the teachers' dedication, creativity, high sense of professionalism, and basic need to survive.

While only increased enrollments in all foreign language classes may eradicate the need for multi-level classes, the reality of today is imminent and concrete realistic support is needed for the teachers of these classes. Pre-service and in-service training are necessary as well as attention to this unique class structure in our professional publications. Sharing among teachers who are facing the same programmatic, and therefore instructional problems, can help lift the heavy weight off their backs. Until such time as the tables of organization in our schools reflect classes in which students and teachers are directing their total efforts into single-level classes, the search for viable and effective means of working with the multi-level class will continue.

FOOTNOTES

1. H. Baird Hunter and Pat Burr-Harrison. "Look What They've Done to My Class, Ma!" Foreign Language Annals, 12 (1979), 426.
2. R. Marshall Brannon and David E. Cox. "Coping with Real Problems in the Secondary Schools." 151-199 in Gilbert A. Jarvis, editor, An Integrative Approach to Foreign Language Teaching: Choosing Among the Options. The ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series, Volume 8. (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook, 1978), 161.
3. Ibid, 161-2.
4. Ibid, 164.
5. Lorraine A. Strasheim. "The Issue: Multi-Level Classes." Foreign Language Annals, 12 (1979), 425.
6. Ibid.

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